

## All in the Name of Love and War

“It is midnight within the social order,” Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote. With these words, Dr. King had in mind the struggle of nations for supremacy. He might just as well have been referring to the so-called war on terrorism.

A recent study about public support for war reveals some notable findings. About 17 percent of all Americans support a war no matter what it’s about. It’s a “rally around the flag” kind of reaction. Another 20 percent support the war if the president is strongly behind it—rallying around our leader. And an *additional* 20 percent support the war if the country has been threatened. In other words, if those three conditions are met, 57 percent of all people will support a war effort no matter what it is about.

It has become accepted dogma these days that we are in an ongoing war on terrorism. But it may be time to question whether we are best served by calling our resistance to terrorism a war.

War is actually a popular metaphor for our struggles against enemies of many different kinds. President Nixon declared war on cancer. Others declare war on disease, illiteracy, poverty, and other such plagues of modern life.

Why are we so eager to call such struggles wars? Political leaders have an obvious self-interest in war. Is it more than coincidence that the 57 percent of people who support any war in response to threats is roughly the same as President Bush’s latest approval rating? Perhaps that’s why we heard so much about Saddam Hussein’s so-called weapons of mass destruction as a reason for going to war, rather than rescuing persecuted Iraqis. As long as people are convinced that we are fighting a war and that the country itself or what we stand for is under attack, the leader is bound to have a majority behind him.

Less cynically, however, calling something a war reflects a greater degree of urgency and common cause in overcoming an enemy than other terms invoke. More than that, war, according to author Chris Hedges, provides a purpose for living, allowing the individual to rise above daily life and participate in a noble cause. Hence the title of his book, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*.

George Lopez, a professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame, has argued that the war on terrorism should not be understood and prosecuted as a war at all, but rather as an enforcement effort of international law against mass murderers. Imagine how different our foreign policy might be with such an understanding. We would still pursue terrorists, but in a quite different fashion.

Furthermore, does it even make sense to think of the effort to stop terrorism as a war? How will we know when the war is won? Do we think that our military efforts will one-day end all attacks by murderers, without inciting more fanatics to do the same? It is often said that 9/11 changed everything. Will it allow us to consider something to be a war that is best considered to

be a quite different kind of struggle?

Hedges suggests that “the myth of war sells and legitimizes the drug of war.” In short, if we find our meaning and common purpose in war, it will seduce us, if not intoxicate us.

Unfortunately, terrorism is tailor-made for a perpetual state of war. Terrorism is about fear, which, according to King, is the root of war: first fear, then hate, then war, and finally deeper hatred. As we honor Martin Luther King, Jr., next week, we might consider what we can learn from him for how we might best escape the cycle of fear and war.

To be sure, the mass murderers of our time should be apprehended. But truly defeating terrorism at its sources may actually require resisting all notions of war. King understood and proved historically how love in the form of active nonviolent resistance can be both effective and morally preferable in overcoming evil. Nonviolence is directed at the forces of evil, King argued, rather than against people who are caught up in evil. And nonviolence resists the violence of the spirit—bitterness and hatred, which only serves to inspire more fear, more violence. Do we need any more confirmation of this truth than the current state of affairs in the Middle East?

Even if the war on terrorism were merely a metaphor, it would still be a dangerous one. It is a metaphor of midnight, to use King’s language, rather than a beacon for a peaceful future. Let us no longer talk of the war on terrorism.

This is Mark Hanson of the Practical Ethics Center at the University of Montana